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## Caterpillar populations on rise

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Researchers associated with the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture say the population levels of the eastern tent caterpillars are among the highest they've seen since 2001, when Mare Reproductive Loss Syndrome (MRLS) hit central Kentucky horse farms particularly hard.

The caterpillars also are wandering a bit later than usual because of the cool spring, said Dan Potter, professor of entomology at UK's College of Agriculture, in a press release.

"The eastern tent caterpillar populations are dramatically up this year — the highest I've seen since the MRLS crisis," Potter said. "The larvae are full size, many trees are totally defoliated and I've seen very large numbers of caterpillars moving along fence rails and wandering out many meters into pastures adjacent to the cherry trees we are using to conduct eastern tent caterpillar trials."

MRLS was strongly linked by university researchers to ingestion of the caterpillars by pregnant mares, leading to late-term foal losses, early-term fetal losses and weak foals. The crisis decimated the yearling population for several years. It was estimated that 30 percent of the 2001 thoroughbred foal crop was lost to MRLS.

The UK entomologists recommend that unless horse farm managers have aggressively managed eastern tent caterpillars, or have removed host trees, they should keep pregnant mares out of pastures bordered by cherry trees or other possible caterpillar sites for a few weeks.

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